



Election 2004

Responsibility and Discernment

An Invitation to Canadian Catholics
by the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs
of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Introduction

1. A federal election can be expected during 2004, according to Canadian parliamentary tradition. As citizens, Canadian Catholics have an obligation to be interested in political life and to exercise their civic responsibilities by participating in the electoral process, particularly by voting.
2. Engagement in the political process is a constant civic duty, not only during electoral campaigns. We encourage Catholics to increase their awareness of the issues involved, to raise their concerns with the political candidates, to encourage strong civic debates, to run for political office, and especially to vote. We also thank everyone who is involved in running for or serving in political office, whether they belong to a particular faith community or not. Their commitment and service are generous contributions to the common good of our society.

Political Discernment

3. The Gospel does not give Catholics a specific program of social and political action. Nor does the Church “*set forth specific political solutions to temporal questions that God has left to the free and responsible judgment of each person.*”¹ Each Catholic must exercise political discernment and prudential judgment. Within a democratic society, there exists a range of legitimate political approaches. At the same time that Catholic moral principles are clear and defined, they can be respected and advanced in many different ways in the political arena. Both in society and within the Catholic community, there exists a range of legitimate political opinions, attitudes, convictions and orientations.

Some key principles of Catholic moral and social teaching

4. The following are some key principles of Catholic moral and social teaching. They are not a political platform but a lens through which to examine and evaluate public policy and programs.

Respect for the Life and Dignity of the Human Person

5. People of faith believe that life comes from God, that human life from beginning to end is a gift beyond measure. Each human being, created in the image of God, has incalculable worth and inherent dignity. Life is the most precious gift that can be given, and it is a Christian duty to love life, respect it and keep it from harm. The sacredness of the human person is at the heart of the Gospel.
6. Catholics believe in the freedom and responsibility to choose and promote human life at all stages, from conception to death. Choosing life means defending and caring for



people in all circumstances, especially the most vulnerable, the most fragile. Choosing life means protecting the smallest of human beings – the human embryo – who is a member of the human family. Choosing life means demanding support for pregnant women. Choosing life means putting in place policies that balance family and work responsibilities, promote a family-centred approach, and provide safe and affordable housing. Choosing life means supporting and being present for those who are disabled, elderly, ill, poor or suffering. Choosing life means promoting peace, reducing violence and resolving conflicts. Choosing life also means respecting the life and dignity of those who are dying, and accompanying them to the very end. Will the upcoming federal election reflect these concerns for each life and all life?

Support for Marriage and the Family

7. Marriage is a loving, life-giving partnership between a man and a woman. Its purpose is the good of the couple and the procreation and education of children. The fulfilment of its objectives contributes to the good of society. For this reason, society has always affirmed the fundamental purposes of marriage. These basic truths can be recognized through human reason and experience. Indeed, marriage is a natural institution that predates all social, legal and religious systems; its existence extends beyond the limits of human memory.
8. Catholics believe that the gift of love between husband and wife, passed on from one couple to another, from one family to another, from one generation to another, is indisputable evidence of the greatness and grace of marriage. Marriage needs the support and protection of society. Will the upcoming federal election reflect this concern?

Preferential Option for the Poor

9. For Christians, concern for the impoverished is not only a political option, but also a Gospel imperative. Jesus had a special love for the weak and vulnerable; he identified himself with them and proclaimed the Good News to them.
10. Pope John Paul II has said that the moral measure of a society is how the most vulnerable are faring.² Catholics are to provide for those in immediate need and to act against injustice. They are called to give preference especially to those who are most at risk, poor or oppressed. How this shapes public policy goals and priorities reflects the character of society. Will the upcoming federal election offer hope to those whose voices are often not heard?

The Common Good

11. The common good is “*the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and easily.*”³ It allows human dignity to be respected and fundamental needs to be met. It is more likely to be achieved when everyone contributes to the building of a just and compassionate society in which the human development of each person is promoted.
12. Human beings are created as members of a family, with roots in the larger community. Humans are social beings who cannot survive without human relationships. Commitment to the common good is expressed in a solidarity that Pope John Paul II has described as “*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.*”⁴ Will the upcoming federal election foster a deeper awareness of what the common good requires?



Taking responsibility at election time

13. Keeping in mind the principles summarized above, how do the various political parties and candidates respond to the following questions? (The list is not exhaustive.)
- What is the position of the candidate and his or her political party on protecting the right to life of all human beings, from conception to natural death?
 - What means will they take to ensure that genetic and reproductive technologies respect, protect and promote human life and dignity?
 - What measures do they propose to defend the rights of women in the home and in the workplace?
 - What are their policies to support women who are faced with unexpected or unwanted pregnancies, both during the pregnancy and after?
 - What means will they take to maintain the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman which is ordered to the good of the couple and the procreation and education of children?
 - What policies do they propose to support families in raising their children and in fulfilling their responsibilities toward the next generation?
 - What are their commitments to ensuring accessibility to health care and home care for all Canadians, particularly the poor, the vulnerable and the elderly?
 - What policies do they propose to encourage global peace and to reverse the spread of space-based weapons systems and nuclear, chemical and biological arms?
 - What commitments have they made to decrease the growing gap between rich and poor people in Canada?
 - What means will they take to advance the social and economic aspirations of Aboriginal Peoples?
 - How will they address the crisis of the lack of affordable and safe housing in Canada?
 - How will they respect the right of refugee applicants to a fair appeal process and help them avoid being deported to a country where their lives may be in danger?
 - How will they increase overseas development assistance to 0.7 percent of Canada's Gross National Product?

Conclusion

14. Elections are times when citizens are invited to make choices. Catholics are to consider this important responsibility as a priority for the common good of all society. To exercise one's right to vote is not only a contribution to life in common, it is also a sign of commitment to all men and women as fellow citizens. Catholics cannot vote without making clear judgments and reflecting on the political choices before them. This would seem to involve at least three elements: a) a basic knowledge and acceptance of the principles of Catholic teaching; b) sufficient familiarity with the platforms of the candidates; and c) careful consideration of how the candidates will best reflect one's most deeply held principles. No candidate will be perfect. But by participating in dialogue leading to discernment and by voting responsibly, Canadian Catholics can nourish their faith and fulfil their responsibilities as citizens.



15. Political participation does not end with the announcement of the electoral results. This is merely the beginning. Catholics want to develop healthy communities. An important sign of a healthy community is when informed and responsible citizens engage their political representatives in ongoing public dialogue on pressing societal concerns. Nothing less can be expected of Christians who are called to be truly responsible for all people.

Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

13 April 2004

-
- 1 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note: On some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life*, no. 3, 24 November 2002.
 - 2 Pope John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2001, *Dialogue between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace*, no. 8.
 - 3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1906.
 - 4 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38, 1987.

Suggested further reading (available at www.cccb.ca)

Marriage Matters, Catholic Organization for Life and Family, 2004.

Marriage in the Present Day, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 10 September 2003.

Statement on the passage in the House of Commons of Bill C-13, An Act Respecting Assisted Human Reproduction, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 29 October 2003.

Life: The Only Choice, Catholic Organization for Life and Family, April 2003.

Families: Messengers of the Compassionate Love of Christ, Catholic Organization for Life and Family, 2003.

The Common Good or Exclusion? Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2 February 2001.

Discerning Electoral Options, Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 2000.